

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

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It's the season for fall mums, asters and pansies

By Jim May

It was a typical summer in Virginia. We had a little bit of everything - hot days, cool nights, thunderstorms, drought - all those elements that make it such an interesting state in which to grow plants. Most areas have had sufficient rainfall and now with cooler weather approaching, many gardeners are turning to fall mums, asters and pansies to fill the color void left vacant by fading summer annuals.

The garden chrysanthemum (*Dendranthema grandiflora*) is a symbol of fall and one of the most popular flowers to be grown in the home landscape for late summer and fall display. Mums require a minimum amount of care and do well even under adverse conditions.

Chrysanthemums come in a wide variety of colors, including white, off-white, yellow, gold, bronze, red, burgundy, pink, lavender and purple.

With hundreds of cultivars available, the choice of plants to grow is unlimited. Mums are often grouped by the shape and arrangement of their petals. To have an even more interesting collection of mums, plant cultivars with different flower forms such as buttons, spiders, pompoms, daisy-like, spoons, anemone, singles, doubles, and semi-doubles.

They used to be called "hardy" mums, but that term has been abandoned by most suppliers because their hardiness varies significantly from one season or area of the state to another, depending on weather and growing conditions.

Plants are available in garden centers in late summer and are typically sold in 4, 6 or 8 inch pots. These well-established plants are ready to transplant into your garden and usually require only regular watering. The plants should be watered whenever the soil starts to dry. Apply enough water to soak the soil to a depth of four to six inches. It is best to apply the water during the day so the foliage will dry off before nightfall to avoid leaf and flower diseases.

Many people keep mums growing from year to year by pinching them back in the spring and summer to encourage flowering. For many of us in the colder regions of Virginia however, mums really need to be considered herbaceous perennials. When frost kills the tops of the plants, cut off the dead flowers and stems.

Repeated freezing and thawing of the soil can heave plants out of the soil, leaving their roots exposed to the elements. Newly planted mums are especially vulnerable to heaving. A layer of straw, pine needles or light mulch will help minimize this problem.

Most garden asters are cultivated varieties of the fall-blooming wildflower, *Aster novi-belgii*, or Michaelmas daisy. They are native to the United States and can be seen blooming

along roadsides during the fall. From the wild types, Danish breeders have selected for new colors and compact shape.

Asters are a great companion plant to mums. These tough, reliable perennials do well in dry climates. In fact, many aster varieties fail to survive the winter if kept too moist.

Growth habits of asters range from three-foot perennials to compact mounds. The Greek word aster refers to the yellow-centered, star-like flowers that can be white, red, pink, purple, lavender and blue.

Though asters generally bloom in late summer and fall, alpine aster blooms in May and June. This little rock-garden plant bears 1-1/2 inch, violet flowers, although white, blue, lavender, and pink flowers are also available. Alpine asters grow best in full sun and well-drained, moist soil.

'Wonder of Stafa' hybrid aster is said to be one of the ten best perennials. The soft, lavender-blue flowers blend well with most other flower colors. After they start to flower in August, they bloom almost continually until late October. Pansies (*Viola x wittrockiana*) and the related Johnny-jump-ups (*Viola cornuta*, *Viola tricolor*) are delightful, small, cool-weather flowers. They come in many colors, with a variety of markings and flower sizes. These compact plants rarely grow more than 12 inches in height and spread. Johnny-jump-ups have much smaller flowers than pansies. They flower heavily and are more heat-resistant than pansies. Johnny-jump-ups are ideal for planting around bulbs and larger flowers.

Pansy flowers can be single, clear colors with no markings. The most common types of pansies have a dark center called a face. Johnny-jump-up flowers look like small pansy flowers, often with slender black lines radiating from the center.

Pansies have an extremely wide color range including red, purple, blue, bronze, pink, black, yellow, white, lavender, mahogany, apricot and orange. Some pansies have a sweet scent. They are most fragrant at early morning and dusk.

Pansies grow best in a location that receives morning sun and has rich, well-draining organic soil. As with the other flowers mentioned above, water pansies early in the day so their leaves can dry before night to avoid disease problems.

Mass plantings are the most effective way to display this flower. Plant pansies and Johnny-jump-ups 6 to 8 inches apart for small-flowered cultivars and 10 to 12 inches apart for large-flowered. Water well after planting and continue to water through the fall and winter any time that less than an inch of rain falls during the week.

A mild fall can mean several more months of growing time for fall flowers. What a great way to brighten up the landscape!

Virginia Gardening with Jim May is brought to you by the Virginia Green Industry Council and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.